

Psychological effects of combat



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PSYCHOLOGY OF A FIGHTING MAN

INTRODUCTION

Movies make the business of fighting and war effortless and uncomplicated. They make us believe that soldiers are some sort of killing machines. The reasons for killing may be many; because they are told, if they don't kill they will die, the enemy is a threat to enduring peace and so on. The movies make us believe that a soldier fires to hit and kill each other. While this holds some truth, a deeper study is needed to understand the psychology behind the actions of these fighting men.

Talking about the psychology of a fighting man is like virgins talking about sex. Days can be spent discussing it and the mechanics involved can be fully understood. However, you cannot be absolutely sure that the man who understood the mechanics behind the psychology will behave as expected, when he is faced with a combat situation.

That is because when bullets and shells start zipping past, the emotions and Adrenaline start running high and that will affect how a fighting man sees things in the battlefield. During warlike situations, every soldier sees things different from another soldier.

AIM

The aim of this paper is to understand the psychology of a fighting man, the factors affecting his desire to kill on the battlefield and how it affects his mind and behavior. The paper also intends to cover the psychiatric effects of combat on a soldier and offer possible solutions.

THE BEHAVIOURAL PATTERN

Behaviour During Combat

When it comes to combat situations, behavior of the animal species can be classified into four stages, Posture, Fight, Flight or Submit. Also, animals do not generally kill others of their species, except with very few exceptions. In this regard, human beings are like animals in our behavior, especially in a combat situation.

When animals fight, they do not directly get to a physical fight. They start posturing to intimidate the enemy.

Humans are not much different. Rifles, artillery guns and tanks provide perfect tools for posturing. They are dangerous, they are loud. Shells and bullets zooming past overhead can be terrifying any man on earth. The shooter gets a feeling of power and the act provides a primal release to him. Posturing also forms part of combat tactics.

It is said that in Vietnam War, only one out of 52000 shots fired scored a hit[1]. Were the Americans that bad at shooting? No, in fact they were very superior in posturing. However, when the time came to aim at the VietCong, the Yankee preferred to posture, rather than to kill.

This does not mean the whole aim is not to kill, but to scare the enemy by posturing. There will be a few whose sole aim is to increase the use of body bags by the other side, whatever maybe their motivation. They are like that one percent of fighter pilots who accounted for forty percent of planes shot down in World War II.

In war, a soldier's behavior is also affected by the fact that whether he has to kill anyone. A person is more willing to face risks if he does not have to kill anyone. Best example in this regards are the medical corps people.

Now, let us understand what happens when the enemy decides to run away. The best way to explain it is by drawing a corollary again with the animal world. What happens when you try to run away from a dog? It will run behind you, catch you and bite you. This may even result in your death. In the same way, to run away from an enemy who is on an adrenaline rush is like signing your death warrant. This is the reason behind retreating forces suffering higher number of casualties.

The Decision to Kill

This is the hardest decision every fighting man has to take on the battlefield. This decision is influenced by many factors. Every soldier who is shooting may not be trying to kill his opponent. He might fire on order. But it is difficult to ascertain whether he is trying to kill. Case in point being 1: 52000 rounds ratio which I talked about in the Vietnam War.

A majority of people will hesitate before killing another human being, unlike what is portrayed in the movies. They will do it only when they are pushed to the corner and this affects them psychologically in a big way.

The Distance. A major factor which affects the decision whether to kill is the distance between a soldier and his enemy. The distance can be broadly classified into two physical distance and emotional distance.

Emotional Distance. Emotional distance has nothing to do with the physical distance between a soldier and his enemy. He can kill his opponent at closer ranges provided he is able to achieve some sort of emotional distance from the enemy.

Moral Distance. Moral distance considers that the enemy is wrong in his morals and ethics.

Social Distance. A fighting man uses social distance to kill an opponent he considers socially inferior to him.

Mechanical distance. Mechanical distance comes into play when the enemy is not seen by one's own eyes. He is seen through a mechanical medium. It could be a screen, a display or a scope. Therefore the trauma of seeing the target as a real human is avoided.

The presence of an officer does wonders to a soldier's willingness to kill an enemy. Other factors which contribute are the want of revenge, hatred or mortal fear. However, studies show that the most important factor which propels a soldier to shoot and kill his enemy is the feeling that if he doesn't kill, he will let down his comrades.

THE EFFECTS ON THE FIGHTING MAN

Psychiatric Casualties

It has been proven that the longer a soldier is exposed to combat situations, the more are the chances that he will become a psychiatric casualty. Now, what is a psychiatric casualty? He can be defined as any militarily ineffective

soldier in whom the predominant factors producing ineffectiveness are of psychological as opposed to physical or neuropsychiatric origin.

How long does it take for an average soldier to become a psychiatric casualty? Roy Swank and Walter Marchand, both US Army doctors conducted a study[2] during world war II and came out with a result that 98% of all surviving soldiers will become psychiatric casualties after sixty days of continuous combat. The remaining 2% were already identified with having aggressive psychopath tendencies. So to put it in lighter vein, a combat unit goes completely crazy at the end of sixty days.

Manifestations of Psychiatric Casualties

The effects of being a psychiatric casualty can be of varied forms. It may also affect different individuals at different degrees. This in no way means that the mental stability of an individual is lost and he is no more capable of fighting. In most cases a window of proper rest away from the frontline will help in alleviating combat stress.

Fatigue. The first and foremost manifestation of combat stress from a prolonged battle is Fatigue. It is nothing but the soldier being tired and is in no mood to do anything.

Confusional State. If the fatigue is not checked in time, a psychiatric casualty can reach Confusional State. In simple terms, a person is 'lost'.

Ganser Syndrome. If a soldier does not slip into Confusional state, he may be affected by something called Ganser syndrome[3]. In this, he starts avoiding fear by substituting it with humour.

Conversion Hysteria. A severe form of Confusional state is called Conversion Hysteria. It can happen while the combat is on or it may surface years later. A psychiatric casualty suffering from Conversion Hysteria loses touch with reality. He cannot distinguish potential dangers. He becomes insensitive to his own security. He may just wander into minefields or enemy fire.

Anxiety Disorders

Continuous state of anxiety during combat creates havoc in a soldier's sleep. He feels that he is always tired irrespective of the amount of rest or sleep he gets. He starts getting nightmares and can also be obsessed with death. He doubts his ability and starts suspecting that he is coward and may fail his colleagues. The symptoms of increased anxiety states are breathlessness, blurred vision, tremors, temporary paralysis and fainting.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD is another effect which can be caused by anxiety. A soldier's blood pressure may increase radically even years after his combat experience causing profuse sweating and nervousness.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorders (OCD). Anxiety can also cause OCD. The behavioural pattern of soldiers with OCD are similar to that of those suffering from Conversion Hysteria. The major difference is that he is aware of his surroundings and actions.

Character Disorders. Anxiety can also cause Character Disorders in a soldier. A soldier becomes obsessed with particular actions or objects. This may result in him being paranoid about his personal safety.

SOLUTIONS

What are the possible solutions to these issues? First and foremost will be proper training and indoctrination. It definitely needs to be sufficient to ensure that it if not prevents, at least delays the onset of combat stress.

The next step should be to identify potential psychiatric casualties as early as possible. Presence of trained counselors and psychiatrists are also essential to ensure that these potential cases do not develop into full blown psychiatric casualties.

Units need to be rotated at the front on a regular basis. A ‘ crazy’ unit at the end of sixty days of combat duty is not only detrimental to themselves, they are dangerous to the nation too.

The final solution remains that of damage control. A psychiatric casualty should be addressed clinically. There should be counsellors at the rear to take care of potential cases.

CONCLUSION

The aim was not to question the capability or motivation of soldiers. It was to bring to light that every armed force today is treading on thin ice as far as the well being of the soldiers is concerned. Psychiatric casualties may take out a good part of a force, maybe more than what will fall prey to enemy bullets. Therefore, it is essential to pay attention the psychology of a fighting man, to realise what drives him, what holds him back and what other than mortal wound will take him out of the equation in a battlefield.

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[1]Collins, Randall “ Violence: A Micro-sociological Theory” Princeton University Press, 2008, pp. 58

[2]Swank, Roy L., and Marchand, Walter E. “ Combat Neuroses: Development of Combat Exhaustion,’ Archives of . Neurology and Psychiatry, American Medical Association, Chicago, IL, USA. vol. 55, 1946, pp. 236-247.

[3]<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20703401>accessed on 02 Aug 13